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The problems of teaching poetry in the elementary classroom are (1) the choice of poems and (2) the way in which the teacher presents the poems. Becuase good poetry can encourage the child's imagination, a teacher should avoid the mediocre "children's poems" generally found in textbooks and should present students with worthwhile poems from other sources that meet the standards of adult poetry. Having students examine two haiku poems, one by Pound and one by a student, can help to create a working definition of poetry and to indicate three possible levels of meaning in a poem--surface, symbolic, and personal. Students who consider these three levels in studying Blake's "Tyger" and Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" frequently have less difficulty with the obscurities of the poems (ignoring those they cannot deal with) than do professional scholars. To teach poetry, the teacher must utilize his interpretive ability to discover the metaphorical level and the deeper significance of the work. As a result, the questions he asks in a discussion will be guided by the sense of the metaphorical significances of the poem, known by the teacher but held open for the discoveries of the students. (LH)

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Poetry in the Elementary Classroom

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Poetry as a mode of perception is uniquely related to cognitive development; and, as such, must play a dominant role in the elementary curriculum. The metaphorical and analogical nature of poetry, so allied to the essence of myth-making by which culture is generated and transmitted, can be a governing part of the business of creating a picture of the world in the child's developing imagination. This importance of symbolization and representation is forcefully indicated when we consider that:

> **We construct a representation of the world for ourselves, and we act in the real world via that representation. What is happening, happens even while we react to it, and is lost, but the representation goes on.[1]**

Furthermore, the sound of poetry adds its own richness to what we now understand is a need of English instruction to appeal to the heightened oral and aural abilities of the child.[2]

Unfortunately, the poems customarily used with children do not always approximate the standards of quality applied to adult poetry. Critically speaking, there are certain necessities of metaphor, imagery, and diction for any poem to be judged "good" or effective. The selection of poems to be used in the primary grades, on the contrary, seems to be governed rather more by the need for good advice in rhyme, or poems which will fit certain special occasions such as Columbus Day, or a rainy day, or Washington's birthday, or which will be "fun," than by the standards generally used in judging, or understanding, adult poetry. Not to say that poems shouldn't be fun; but instead of choosing poems for children from a critical sense of the poetically rich, there seems to have been some misguided sense by teachers, editors, anthologists, etc., that poetry is either a game or a vehicle for propaganda. Instead of meaningful poetry, children are too often left with the mediocre which goes under that ambiguous tag "Children's Poetry": skipping bunnies, fluffy kittens, pink piggies and the rest.

WILLIAM ANDERSON developed this article from experiences in the recent Tri-University Project in Elementary Education at the University of Nebraska. Last summer he served as Co-Director of an NDEA Institute for Elementary English and is now on the staff of the Experienced Teacher Fellowship Program at San Fernando. Dr. Anderson is giving two workshops at the CATE convention in Los Angeles on teaching poetry to children.

To be sure, there are notable exceptions to this: Frost's *You Come Too,* Dunning's *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle,* and Bogan's *The Golden Journey* are three collections of authentic poems. They are good in the ways that adult poetry is said to be good. But still there is the open suspicion in my mind about some lack of success in teaching poetry in the elementary and secondary grades. This is largely induced, I suppose, by my continual wonderment at how little college freshmen seem to know about poetry. This sentiment is likewise inherent in another discussion of this same topic:

> **. . . And it is poetry—that bugbear which many readers and teachers claim they cannot understand, much less enjoy. . . . Why, then, is poetry alone of the arts so neglected? For many teachers it presents a bewildering subject.[3]**

The problems of poetry in the elementary classroom, then, seem to be two: (1) the choice of poems, and (2) the way in which the teacher presents the poems.

Perhaps some working descriptions of poetry can ease some of the "bewilderment" as well as suggest some better choices of poems to be used in the classroom. Doubtless the thrust of the argument can be more telling if derived from a comparison of a poem by a child with that of a master poet. Here are two haiku: one is by a nine-year-old girl, and the other is by Ezra Pound:

In a Station of the Metro

EZRA POUND

Haiku

The trees cry sadly
Because the north wind blows cold
And brings much sorrow.

DEEDEE X

Let's consider the poem by Pound. First, Pound has seen faces in the crowd of the subway station in Paris, and he wants to create in the reader an awareness of (1) what he saw, and (2) how he felt about what he saw. The second word of the poem, "apparition," begins to do this. Because "apparition" means not only "ghostly," but also anything which has a particularly startling appearance, the faces must have struck

Pound with some kind of aesthetic shock. Then Pound goes on to say that they were like "petals on a wet, black bough." In this line, the major emphasis is on the contrast between the delicate petals and the color of the branch. Of course the faces in the crowd do not look *exactly* like petals, but there is something in the way that they do appear to the poet which is analogical to the way that petals must look against a background of a wet, black branch. Perhaps the entirety of the set of correspondences can be represented so as to yield the unknown which is implied:

faces : petals : : X : wet, black bough

Because the setting for the petals is the wet, black bough, the setting for the faces must be what is implied in the comparison. Thus the analogue for the wet, black bough is the subway station. And just as petals are similar to faces in both color and texture, we can probably infer that the subway station is similar to the bough: grimy (black) and dank (wet). The warm flesh tones against this background are an "apparation" in their startling contrast with the walls of the Metro; the petals differ sharply in color and texture from the branch.

The major purpose served by this kind of comparison is to communicate the poet's perceptions to one has not been in the subway in Paris, and who might well not have seen or felt the same things that Pound did even if he had been there. Although we might not have been in the subway, however, we have all seen, or could easily imagine, petals on a wet, black bough. And just as we envisage the image of the flowers on the branch, we can then make the connection necessary to understand or imagine what the faces in the crowd were like. Pound has used something that is known in order to describe something personal, something that is private in nature and not easily communicated. He has created an identification between flowers and faces, and between the two backgrounds. The choice of the comparisons made is supportive of the aesthetic value given to the scene by his choice of the word "apparition."

Now consider the other haiku (and let's not quibble that Pound's poem is not a haiku because it is not in the Rulebook form with seventeen syllables: a haiku is seeing, not counting). The child-poet has, like Pound, used a scene from nature to express a feeling and a mood:

The trees cry sadly
Because the north wind blows cold
And brings much sorrow.

Here Deedee is describing a common occurrence—how the wind sounds when it blows through trees. But when she says that the "trees cry sadly," she has gone a step beyond a literal description of the scene. The trees do not actually cry; the sound they make is *like* someone crying. But because human feelings are attributed to the trees, there is correspondingly a further identification between the description of the wind in the trees and human situations. Thus the wind that makes the trees cry must also be identified with some other value, something that is to humans like the wind is to the tree. What in the human condition is like the North wind? Adversity, sorrow of a particular kind which brings the kind of loss to men that the cold wind brings to the tree, robbing it of its leaves, causing it to go into a dormant state for the winter, is the counterpart human situation. Perhaps we might recall Shakespeare's

> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold—
> Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
> In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
> As after Sunset fadeth in the West.
>
> SONNET 73

Both Pound and the child (plus Shakespeare) have found something that is known, or could easily be envisioned from the description, to make a comparison with something else, something that would be infinitely more difficult to express without the visible part of the analogy. It would of course be entirely possible for Pound to have described in clinical detail how the faces looked: their spectrophotometrical readings compared with that of the subway walls, with minute temperature and moisture readings of both could have conveyed some sense of the contrast or "apparition." But this would hardly give quite the effect achieved and made vital by the metaphor he chose. Deedee, likewise, could have listed all the ways that loss can come to humans; but obviously she could not have done so in seventeen syllables. And, Shakespeare . . .

Perhaps the following grid can also describe what our two poets seem to have done to achieve their effects:

1-Level	2-Level	3-Level
Surface	Symbolical Meaning	Personal Response

The poems can both be described in terms of "levels." First there is the surface, or the literal description that the poem gives. In the case of the

Pound poem, this would be the seemingly disassociated statements about faces and petals; in the child's haiku, the literal surface is that the wind is blowing. Both poems, however, reach a deeper, or second, level, in both instances a meaning of greater importance than the surface level. This deeper structure can be called the interpretive or symbolical level. That petals are used as a comparison for faces makes the interpretation possible that the faces are contrasted with the background of the subway station in the same manner that the petals are in contrast with the wetness and blackness of the branch. Likewise in the child's haiku, the fact that the trees "cry" makes the 2-level mean that the "sorrow" or loss brought to them is like the bereavement that comes to humans which is analogous to the loss of leaves. And beyond these two levels, there is the wholly personal response one might have to a poem, the 3-level. On this level of identification we would find such terms used as "liking" or "hating" a poem; also we would encounter reactions to the poem which are beyond its immediate scope of metaphor. If, for example, one were to say of the Pound poem: "Oh, yes, that is the way my grandmother's chickens used to look," this would be a response on the personal level. Although it is certainly true that the chickens might have looked just like the faces at the Metro, still that is beyond what the poet is encompassing in his images of the faces and the petals. The 3-level is a valid and essential value in the apprehension of a poem; the point is, however, that it is not as close to the poem itself as the 2-level.

In the matter of teaching a poem, the question that always arises is: "Should we try to analyze the poem with the children, or should we simply allow them to "enjoy" it with no direction from the teacher?" The problem in speaking up for analysis is that there is a widely prevalent notion that the explication of poetry is like dissection and is thus detrimental, indeed totally destructive, to the aesthetic values of the work. Keats described this notion in *Lamia* by saying that "Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings."

Doubtless there are ways of approaching a poem which are like clipping an angel's wings. Perhaps the kind of authoritarian approach which insists on only one meaning, which is to be memorized and repeated on the next test, is like this. And there are obviously ways of presenting poetry which make it seem that a poem works as rigidly and soullessly as a mechanical bird to "keep a drowsy emperor awake." We have all known a Mr. M'Choakumchild.

But are the alternatives this clear and exclusive—namely kill it or don't touch? Could we maybe sniff the poem? Within the spirit of

exploring this question, I took several poems and went to the mountain, in this case the Clare McPhee School in Lincoln, Nebraska, for six weeks of teaching poems to children in grades two through six.* Perhaps my experiences there will, in the telling, knit up a portion of the unraveled sleeve of poesy. I wanted to discover if there is a possibility that children could see things in even the most difficult poem which were sufficient to say that they had a valid conceptualization of it. Jerome Bruner's statement got me started on this quest:

> **We begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught effectively in intellectually honest form to any child at any state of development.**[5]

Thus emboldened, I took as my two "test" poems (although I finally used many others) William Blake's "The Tyger" and Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." I attempted to create an atmosphere not only of pleasure, but also one of intellectual seriousness, tempered by the demands of working with children. My first desire was to see how the children would respond to good and difficult material when presented to them in somewhat the manner I address my college classes, where there is, hopefully, as much a respect for the intellect of the student as for the material studied. I tried a bit of nonsense verse and whimsy to "warm up" the group, but they soon seemed to sense that I was not really involved with it and they refused to be either. Certainly humorous verse has its place in the realm of poetry; let me assert, however, that I am talking about the serious study of poetry and not a romp period.

To the forest with the tiger, then. There can be little doubt that one of the most difficult poems in English is Blake's "The Tyger." Perhaps the great number of critical articles concerned with explicating this poem will attest not only to its seeming impenetrability but also to its merit. For a single poem so to tease the efforts of critics must indicate some great magnetism, some great worth seen in the continual quest to know all of the smiling, sphinxlike secrets of "The Tyger."

All the difficulties of the poem aside and being granted, it seemed to me a lark to see if Blake himself were genuinely prophetic when he reputedly claimed that only children could understand his poems. Whether or not Blake spoke in pique because of the neglect of his contemporaries or from a vital conviction, with Wordsworth, that the child is in imaginative powers "an eye among the blind," the children to whom I taught the

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* My thanks to the faculty of this school for their interest in the project, and their tolerance of my antics.

poem had much less difficulty with its obscurities than contributors to *The Explicator* and PMLA.

The major difference in focus between the children and the critics was that the children ignored the difficult parts and reveled in what they could grasp characteristically, the scholars seem to savor the problems and impossibilities of the poem.

These matters aside, here is the process of presenting "The Tyger" to children from grades two through six. But before going into the teaching situation, a certain amount of background is necessary, as well as an understanding of the text of the poem.

The Tyger

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forest of the night.
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?
What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?[6]

"The Tyger" appears in the *Experience* section of the collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* which has as its subtitle: "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul,"[7] indicating that the

pastoralism and childlike quality of *Songs of Innocence* are polarities to the moral and spiritual decay of the *Songs of Experience* where we hear the curse of the harlot and the rattle of "mind-forg'd manacles." Furthermore, most of the poems in each section have a counterpart poem in the other section. "The Tyger" of *Experience* is opposed to "The Lamb" of *Innocence.*

With this all too brief description of the setting of "The Tyger," I decided that the essential things to know about the poem for me to feel that the teaching experience had been "intellecturally honest" were these:

1. A knowledge that "The Tyger" represents energy.
2. The energy represented is malevolent.
3. Not only is the energy malevolent, but it is "fallen" or corrupted.
4. This fallen energy is in fact human energy entrapped in the inhuman world of evil churches and governments.
5. Who could have created, or could have dared to create, innocence coexistently with experience, i.e. the lamb and the tyger?
6. That the last question remains unanswered and its implications are left to the mind of the reader.

After reading the poem to the children, I would usually initiate the discussion with a question which would relate the poem to the life experiences of the child: "Have you ever seen a tiger?" Almost invariably there would be a positive response: yes, in a zoo, on television, in the movies, etc. If one of the children said he had never seen a tiger, I would ask one of the children who had seen one to describe it to the others. This got us into the poem. I would then ask "What color was the tiger you saw?" "Gold, or orange, or yellow." "Was there anything about the tiger to make him look like he was burning?" "Oh, yes! his stripes—the color of the yellow is the flame and the black is soot." This got to the principal of energy. Heat is energy. Then I picked up the line about the fire of the tiger's eyes. The questioning here would begin with my making my eyes look wide and evil and then I would ask the children if fire in the eye meant anything to them. Immediately the response was that the tiger was mean. Thus the idea was there that the energy was malevolent.

To get the discussion around to the concept of the tiger as symbolic of human character, I asked the children simply if they had any tiger in them. We talked about this for a few minutes, and several children acted out what it meant for them to be like a tiger. Then the question of the lamb came up. Twice I got the response from the children that the line

"Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" meant something like "In like a lion, out like a lamb." As we related this proverb in its application to the seasons, we got the point into the open that divergent characters may be necessary in the scheme of things. But we closed with a fine sense that there were many issues in the poem which Blake had left unanswered.

To give a feeling of how some of the other discussions went, I have transcribed part of the talk about the Frost poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." My interpretation of the last two lines, the repeated "And miles to go before I sleep" is that the first one means "and a long distance to travel before I am home," and that the second one means "a long time to live before I die." Here is that part of the discussion I had with a group of fourth-graders.

Q Would you stop if you were riding along the woods?
A Yeah. No! YEAH!
I would be afraid of getting cold.
Q Then you think it odd that this man stops there, too?
A Sure.
Q Why does he stop?
A To look at the beauty of the woods.
Q And you wouldn't want to do this?
A Yeah, I would. (several voices)
Q While he is stopped he starts thinking about going on home, right?
A Yes.
Q Now, the poet has sixteen lines. He repeats one of them, which probably means he likes it. Which one is this?
A And miles to go . . .
Q You think this line is important?
A It sort of sounds like an echo—first louder and then kind of getting lower.
Q Why does he like this line?
A Maybe he doesn't.
Q (I read the two lines again)
What's it say?
A It's like he wants to get in a different place.
Q OK.
A I think he just wants to get home and rest.
Q Any more than that?
A Well I think he wants to go further than just sitting looking at these woods. He wants it to mean more.

Q Oh?
A He means that he has a long way to go before he can rest.
Q You seem to be getting close to something else. Actually these woods may not be very far from the village.
A Before he dies.
Q Very good.

A bit later in the discussion we get to the difference between the horse and the man in the poem, and the answers here are interesting:

Q What is the major difference between the horse and the man?
A The horse has four legs and the man has two.
Q Good.
A Well, one of them's happy and the other one is sad.
Q Fine.
A The man wants to stop and look at the beauty of the woods but the horse wants to go on home.
Q That's right.
A The man knows he's going to die and the horse doesn't.

It would seem to me, then, that in our choice of poems for children, and in our methods of teaching them, it is the metaphorical level which probably has been most neglected. The implications for further work, by teachers and by trainers of teachers, are clear. To teach poetry, one needs the interpretive ability to discover the deeper significance of the work. Obviously only someone who has first made certain discoveries himself can help others uncover seemingly veiled meanings. The questions asked in the talk period about the poem must be governed by the sense, known by the teacher but held open for the discoveries of the students, of the metaphorical significances of the poem. And finally, the teacher who has a keen critical sense will be free to find new poems in places other than the textbooks placed before him. This would be liberation.

[1] Britten, James, *Reason and Change in Elementary Education,* Second National Conference, the U.S. Office of Education Tri-University Project in Elementary Education, p. 55.
[2] Strickland, Ruth G., *The Language Arts in the Elementary School,* 2nd Edition: D. C. Heath and Co., 1957, p. 152.
[3] Arnstein, Flora, *Poetry in the Elementary Classroom,* Appleton-Century Crofts, 1962, p. 1.
[4] Untermeyer, Louis, *Modern American and Modern British Poetry,* Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955, p. 157.
[5] Bruner, Jerome S. *The Process of Education,* Vintage, 1960. p. 33.
[6] Blake, William. *Complete Writings.* Oxford, 1966. p. 214.
[7] *Ibid.* p. 210.